



[Conflict between ship owners and the Roman government \(CIL III, 14165.8\) \[1\]](#)

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Imperial letter.

Original Location/Place: Beyrouth (Berytus), Lebanon.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Gallery of bronzes, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Date: 198 CE to 203 CE

Physical Characteristics: Circular bronze disc, from a much larger piece, inscribed on the face with a Latin text in two columns. Re-used to cover a well, with the reverse of the disc decorated with concentric bands and a hunt scene of paired animals.

Material: Bronze.

Measurements:

Diameter of surviving section: 36 cm

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications: *CIL* III, 14165.8

EDH: [HD014831](#) [2]

Commentary: Discovered in 1899 in Beirut, Lebanon, and published in 1902, this inscription records the handling of a dispute that had broken out between shipowners from Arelate in Gaul (Arles, France) and the Roman government. Although the text is fragmentary now – having been cut down into its present disc shape from a larger bronze plaque – the surviving column of text reveals an accusation of fraud levied at Rome by these shipowners, who had turned to the *corpora* (“corporations,” or perhaps “unions”) that represented their interests as a group, in order to fight such injustice. It is an important text for the evidence it provides for how such disputes were resolved by the Roman authorities, and for how the threat of collective action, on the part of the shipowners, yielded an outcome so favourable that it was possibly copied and displayed at the other end of the Mediterranean. The precise origin of the dispute cannot be reconstructed with any specificity, owing to the loss of the majority of the second column of text. However, from the text that does survive, it appears that the shipowners from Arles were responsible for the transport of grain for the *annona* (grain supply) of the city of Rome; they had been treated unfairly by Roman officials and as a result had threatened to cease the movement of goods until certain protections had been guaranteed. Any disturbance to the grain supply of the capital had potentially catastrophic repercussions, giving the Arelate corporations here a certain hold over the government (Meijer and van Nijf, *Trade, Transport and Society*, p. 77). For this reason, the Prefect of the Annona responded positively to their plea for support, and set in motion a number of protections in order to mitigate against the injustices they claimed to have suffered.

The initial complaint of the Arelate shipowners does not survive in the inscription, although we can assume it to have originally been included as part of the official document that was inscribed in bronze given the statement in lines 7-9 that a copy of the decree has been added to this letter (*exemplum decreti naviculariorum marinarum Arelatensium quinque corporum...subiec*). The right hand column of the inscription is badly damaged and cannot be reconstructed, but the left hand column has been restored with some clarity; it is a letter to the shipowners from the Prefect of the Annona, who is named in the text as Claudius Julianus. Prosopographical analysis has identified him as the same Prefect who later served as Prefect of Egypt under Septimius Severus and Caracalla, dating the inscription to c. 198-203 CE (Pflaum, *Les carrières procuratoriennes*, p. 624; *P.Oxy* XLVII.3341-3343. For the role of Claudius Julianus in resolving this dispute, see Virlouvet, “Les Naviculaires d’Arles,” p. 341-351). As Mireille Corbier rightly noted, the text of his letter can be divided into four main points, which are grouped in two sections; the first half of the inscription, lines 1-13, acknowledge the original complaint and note the reason for the intervention (Corbier, *Donner à voir*, p. 240-241). Firstly Claudius Julianus greets the “five corporations of the marine shippers of Arelate” (*naviculariis / marinis Arelatensibus quinque / corporum salute*). The identity of these five “corporations” has been somewhat disputed; some scholarship has suggested that the singular *corpus*, or “corporation” of Arles was, at the turn of the third century CE, divided according to the model of the five *lenuncularii* – guilds of ferrymen – known from Ostia (see e.g. De Salvo, *Economia privata e pubblici servizi nell'impero romano*, p. 409). More recent scholarship, such as that of Nicolas Tran, has proposed the more likely scenario that the *corpus* of Arles and four other *corpora* – which were based elsewhere in the empire – “were treated as a joint unit by the Roman state,” which would also explain why an inscription that appeared to deal with



a localised situation in southern Gaul was set up so far away in the Eastern Mediterranean (Tran, “The Social Organization of Commerce and Crafts,” p. 260-261). Following the statement of greeting to the five *corpora*, the inscription states that Claudius Julianus has read the decree and ordered a response, which is to follow. The motivation for his response is given in lines 10-12, in which it becomes clear that not only is the complaint from the *navicularii* in Arelate a problem, but that it risks spreading to other corporations, who might make similar complaints: “and should the same dispute continue further, and the other (*navicularii*) appeal to justice with what amounts to a formal complaint” (*eadem querella la/tius procedat ceteris etiam imploranti/bus auxilium aequitatis cum quadam de/nuntiatione*). Should this arise – that the “injustice continues”, then other corporations too might cease to perform their services to the imperial court (*cessaturi propediem obsequi / si permaneat iniuria*). The potential to destabilise the entire system of trade and transport, and particularly with regards to a system as sensitive as that of the grain supply to the capital city, was clearly a serious concern (Virlouvet, “Les Naviculaires d’Arles,” p. 329-330). The threat of continued action on the part of the *corpora* has often, then, been compared with that of modern trade unions, encouraging strike action amongst its members. Mireille Corbier, however, has questioned whether such a comparison is appropriate, noting that the *navicularii* were not employed as agents of the state, but rather as private shippers who were contracted to move the grain, but who were not obliged to renew their contracts with the imperial administration in the future; this, she suggests, is the threat of action that was proposed in the original decree to the Prefect, and not necessarily the immediate refusal to fulfil their duties (Corbier, *Donner à voir*, p. 241).

The second part of the letter begins with the resulting orders of the prefect, that are intended to ensure against such action arising in future. Claudius Julianus states that he “requests that provision be made for both a guarantee against fiscal loss in the books and for exoneration of the people providing services for the *annona* (*peto...ut tam indemn/tati rationis quam securitati hominum / qui annonae deserviunt consulatur*)”. This gives some idea as to the nature of the dispute itself; clearly the shipowners had suffered some financial penalty and had also been accused of not transporting the correct amount of grain. They had been accused of bringing less cargo on board than the bills of lading (*securitas*) recorded, and which the procurator of the province’s staff kept, but the complaint of the *navicularii* must have been that they delivered the quantity of grain that they had loaded, meaning that the ‘fraud’ had taken place amongst those in charge of the documentation, i.e. the procurator and his staff. In order to protect the *navicularii* from further penalties and legal charges, Claudius Julianus ordered the procurator to “mark the iron bars, and that escorts from your staff be provided, who will hand over (details of) the cargo weight that they have taken on board” (*inprimi caractere regulas ferreas et / adplicari prosecutores ex officio tuo iu/beas qui in urbe pondus quo susce/perint tradant*). The “marking of iron bars” has been interpreted as a marking on the interior of the ship’s hold which measured the quantity of grain, which would have been poured in loose. The marker was indelible, and served as a guarantee of the correct amount transported, for which the *navicularii* would also receive a receipt (Sirks, *Food for Rome*, p. 98). If the procurator and his staff were indeed those acting fraudulently – as the *navicularii* from Arles clearly believed to be the case – then the instruction to follow such orders (*peto iubeas*, or “I ask that you give the order”) from the Prefect of the *Annona* would have acted as an acknowledgement of their crime, and also a warning against future instances of illegal documentation; the fact that this order was recorded in the inscription, and on bronze – the material used for legal inscriptions and decrees – gave the instruction a public *gravitas* that could not be dismissed or overlooked.

The provenance of the inscription has long been a subject of scholarly debate; some have questioned whether or not the shipping trade that operated from Arles was so great that it included ports in the Greek speaking East, and that the “five corporations” referred to in the text was indicative of Arles, and four other ports or regions that were “essential” to the supply of Rome (Tran, “The Social Organization of Commerce and Crafts,” p. 261). Boudewijn Sirks dismissed these theories entirely, preferring instead the suggestion that the inscription was moved from Europe – and likely from close to Arles – by the Crusaders, who carried it back to the eastern Mediterranean (Sirks, *Food for Rome*, p. 99, n. 174). Catherine Virlouvet, however, has proposed that although the inscription did not likely originate in Lebanon, it may well have adorned an eastern Mediterranean port such as Tyre or Alexandria (Virlouvet, “Les Naviculaires d’Arles,” p. 356-7, esp. n. 82); for it to have been transported from one of these sites to Beirut in the early modern period is perhaps more feasible. As Nicolas Tran has reasonably suggested, if the *corpus* of Alexandria was also one of the five that “stood in direct contact with the state, the *navicularii*...would have had an interest in putting up the decisions of Claudius Julianus publicly: the problems raised by the *navicularii* of Arles ended in a general resolution that the five *corpora* could claim” (Tran, “The Social Organization of Commerce and Crafts,” p. 261). However the inscription arrived in Beirut, it is clear that the shipowners of Arelate had exercised an important display of independent power in the face of the corruption of Roman government; they demanded, and obtained, a legal decree from the governor, and by threatening to bring their service in the transportation of Rome’s grain supply to an end should such injustices continue, they put pressure on the Roman imperial court in an unparalleled way. No emperor or administration could risk famine in the capital, and as such



Claudius Julianus was forced to respond amicably, and in support of the *navicularii*. Although comparisons with modern industrial action may not be appropriate, the collective refusal of promised services in the face of unfair treatment was a powerful symbol of self-determination and autonomy.

Keywords in the original language:

- [navicularius](#) [3]
- [marinus](#) [4]
- [Arelate](#) [5]
- [corpus](#) [6]
- [salus](#) [7]
- [decretum](#) [8]
- [procurator](#) [9]
- [Augustus](#) [10]
- [vir egregius](#) [11]
- [epistula](#) [12]
- [subiectus](#) [13]
- [querella](#) [14]
- [auxilium](#) [15]
- [aequitas](#) [16]
- [denuntiatio](#) [17]
- [iniuria](#) [18]
- [indemnitas](#) [19]
- [ratio](#) [20]
- [securitas](#) [21]
- [annona](#) [22]
- [regula](#) [23]
- [officium](#) [24]
- [urbs](#) [25]
- [pondus](#) [26]

Thematic keywords:

- [Egypt](#) [27]
- [Arles](#) [28]
- [annona](#) [29]
- [grain supply](#) [30]
- [Rome \(city\)](#) [31]
- [shipping](#) [32]
- [maritime trade](#) [33]
- [trade union](#) [34]
- [corporation](#) [35]
- [imperial justice](#) [36]
- [fraud](#) [37]
- [Roman corruption](#) [38]
- [Roman justice](#) [39]
- [imperial power](#) [40]

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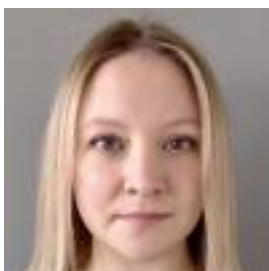
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- [4] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/marinus>
- [5] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/arelate>
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- [8] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/decretum>
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- [12] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/epistula>
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- [18] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/iniuria>
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- [20] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/ratio>
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- [22] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/annona>
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- [24] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/officium>
- [25] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/urbs>
- [26] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/keywords/pondus>
- [27] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/egypt>
- [28] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/arles>
- [29] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/annona>
- [30] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/grain-supply>
- [31] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/rome-city>
- [32] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/shipping>
- [33] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/maritime-trade>
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- [35] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/corporation>
- [36] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/imperial-justice>
- [37] <https://www.judaism-and-rome.org/thematic-keywords/fraud>
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